

## Picturing the 'English Roadside'

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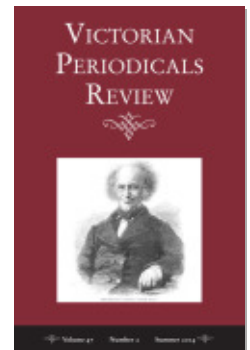
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## Picturing the “English Roadside”: George Meredith’s Poetry and Once a Week

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# Picturing the “English Roadside”: George Meredith’s Poetry and *Once a Week*

REBECCA N. MITCHELL

On August 28, 1858, the London-based *Examiner* featured a poem by George Meredith titled “Arms and Old Law.”<sup>1</sup> Published among a series of articles bemoaning British unpreparedness for war and advocating for better armaments, the poem drew on nationalistic nostalgia to make its case. Noting that “Twelve arrows, and a bow, and spear, / Old British Law decreed, / That every British householder / Should keep for Britain’s need,” the poem is a call to arms, or at least a call to arming British soldiers more effectively, as demonstrated in the rallying final quatrain: “Arms! be the cry, that so we pluck / The fang from Danger’s maw, / And march secure in honour, loyal / To a manly Law!”<sup>2</sup> The poem’s straightforward style and meter, as well as its hyper-masculine, pro-Britannia bent, would seem to make “Arms and Old Law” a thematic outlier among Meredith’s poetry, especially among his later, better-known work.

In addition to its unusual theme, the poem is noteworthy because after its original appearance, “Arms and Old Law” disappears from the written record of Meredith’s oeuvre.<sup>3</sup> It is not included in any later collection of Meredith’s poetry: it does not appear in the *Edition de Luxe*, the Box Hill edition, or the memorial edition of his works, and it is not included in Phyllis Bartlett’s still-definitive edition, *Poems of George Meredith* (1978) or in any existing bibliography of Meredith’s verse.<sup>4</sup> In 1930, the poem was momentarily rescued from obscurity when it was reprinted in the English Society of Japan’s journal *Studies in English Literature*.<sup>5</sup> In a brief headnote to the poem, Takeshi Saito draws attention to the poem’s thematic incongruence with Meredith’s other works: “A student of Meredith’s political ideas will be interested in these stanzas in contrast with his later internationalistic poems.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, following “Arms and Old Law,” Meredith soon broke new ground; his poetry became more mature by leaps

and bounds and his engagement with Britishness more complicated, yet the tone of this early poem proved enduring. As Saito suggests, recognizing the nationalism of “Arms and Old Law” helps to contextualize the reception of Meredith’s broader body of work. What is more, the simplicity of the poem casts into relief another often-overlooked dynamic in the reception history of Meredith’s verse. Tracing the evolution of nationalist sentiment in Meredith’s early poetry, it becomes apparent that while the fervor of “Arms and Old Law” soon gave way to more nuanced or critical depictions of Britannia in the poems themselves, nostalgic patriotism instead arose in the illustrations that accompanied some of Meredith’s later poems published in periodicals. A series of illustrated poems featured in *Once a Week* in the years following the publication of “Arms and Old Law” proves to be an interesting case study in the persistence of first impressions. These “Roadside” poems were published when Meredith’s work had not yet become known for cosmopolitanism, appearing in a magazine known for its political conservatism and with accompanying illustrations that emphasized an idyllic, pastoral England. They were thus understood—despite their challenging content—as forwarding a vision of wholesome Britishness.

Lorraine Janzen Kooistra and Simon Cooke have noted that the relationship between text and image can be overlooked due to critical emphasis on addressing images as works of art in their own right separate from the texts they were intended to illustrate.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, critical emphasis on published collections, as opposed to a poem’s (potentially multiple) published incarnations, can elide the impact of a poem’s early reception on its later appearances. Kathryn Ledbetter’s work on Tennyson’s negotiation of annuals and periodicals counters such a critical emphasis and exposes the necessity of considering poetry in light of the manifold publication venues available to Victorian poets.<sup>8</sup> Following Ledbetter’s lead, I turn to the illustrated iterations of a group of poems published in *Once a Week* to suggest that they form an important backdrop to the eventual publication of Meredith’s 1862 volume, *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside, with Poems and Ballads*, in which the poems were reprinted without their illustrations and labeled the “Roadside Philosophers.” Viewed on their own, the Roadside poems can be understood as countering an idealized vision of Britishness, pointing out hypocrisy and the limitations of narrow-minded nationalism. Yet critics hailed them as wholesome antidotes to the more challenging content of the “Modern Love” sonnet sequence and treated them as if they communicated the same pride and nostalgia as “Arms and Old Law.” Rather than using “Modern Love” as a cue to read the ambivalence and complexity of the portrayals in the Roadside poems, critics emphasized their simplicity and goodness in contradistinction to the

sonnets. One reason for this contemporary critical misreading lies outside the poems themselves. In early versions of the Roadside poems published in *Once a Week*, content is in tension with the consistency of vision presented in the accompanying illustrations, particularly in “The Last Words of Juggling Jerry” and “The Old Chartist.” The idealized, pastoral illustrations continued to color reactions to the poems even after they were collected in the *Modern Love* volume. I propose that the publication of these illustrated works in *Once a Week* consolidated a response that lingered not only in critical reactions to the volume but also in later scholarship on Meredith’s poetic works.

### Meredith and *Once a Week*

George Meredith’s association with *Once a Week* and its editor, Samuel Lucas, was timely. As one of the earliest contributors, Meredith used the magazine as a springboard for his career; in turn, his contributions helped to establish the tenor of the publication. Bradbury and Evans founded *Once a Week* in 1858 with the explicit intention of countering Dickens’s new *All the Year Round*, which did not include illustrations.<sup>9</sup> *Once a Week* highlighted the work of its illustrators by listing their names in its prospectus: “A Miscellany of Literature, Art, Science, and Popular Information, to be illustrated by Leech, Tenniel, Millais, Hablot K. Browne, C. Keene, Wolf, &c., &c., will be published every Saturday, price Threepence, by Bradbury and Evans.”<sup>10</sup> Although the prospectus did not include the names of contributing authors, it nevertheless previewed their literary offerings: “[*Once a Week*] will contain the usual chief elements which attract the majority of readers, viz.: a considerable proportion of Fiction, including serial tales by Novelists of celebrity, discussions of Social characteristics, History, Biography, Incidents of Travel, and Papers on contemporary or past transactions, in which a wide interest is taken, or which afford lively illustrations of character and manner.”<sup>11</sup> Curiously, poetry was not mentioned in the announcement although it played an important role in the journal beginning with the debut issue, which featured an illustrated poem by Shirley Brooks on the first page.

Lucas had responded favorably to Meredith’s fiction, which by the late 1850s included the well-received *Shaving of Shagpat* (1856) and *Farina* (1857). By the late 1850s, these novels, along with his periodical writing (for example, the “Belles Lettres” series in the *Westminster Review*, April 1857–January 1858), had long overshadowed his slight first volume of verse, *Poems* (1851).<sup>12</sup> Yet Meredith’s first contribution to *Once a Week* was a poem, “The Song of Courtesy,” published in the journal’s second issue. If Meredith felt honored by the patronage of *Once a Week*, there

was no sign of humility in the letter he sent to Lucas after publication of the inaugural issue: "I don't like your first number. It contains no pieces of weight. It has too many small pieces. It has made no impression among the people I have met anywhere . . . It is inconsequent."<sup>13</sup> Despite the critique, Lucas continued to publish Meredith's work; indeed, as recent scholars note, Lucas's editorial taste was more impressive than his sales acumen. Meredith's novel *Evan Harrington*, the second novel serialized in *Once a Week*, received a fairly warm reception from critics but most likely had a negative effect on circulation of the magazine.<sup>14</sup> For all of his bluster, Meredith was careful not to overestimate his own celebrity. When Lucas advertised the forthcoming *Evan Harrington*, noting that an "important Serial by a Popular Author is already in the Artist's hands, and will appear before the end of January," Meredith wrote to him in response, saying, "Oh, Heaven! Why have you advertised me as a 'popular author'? Isn't it almost a fraud on the public? Won't they stare when they behold this notorious child they are unacquainted with?"<sup>15</sup> By his own admission, Meredith's career was at a stage where a public impression had yet to be fixed and the consistency among the *Once a Week* poems would contribute to a unified vision of his work.

Among Meredith's poems that did appear in *Once a Week*—a total of fourteen from July 1859 through January 1864—ten were illustrated, including the four poems that would come to be labeled the "Roadside Philosophers." They were published over an extended period of time: the first of the four, "The Last Words of Juggling Jerry," appeared in the September 3, 1859 issue, and the last in the group, "The Old Chartist," appeared in the February 8, 1862 issue, just a few months before the publication of the *Modern Love* volume.<sup>16</sup> Despite the length of time between their appearances and despite having no indication of being so grouped upon their initial publication, the poems apparently stood out for Meredith even before the organization of the *Modern Love* volume had become set. In November 1861, he wrote to the Reverend Jessop, "My Jugglers, Beggars, etc., I have met on the road, and have idealized but slightly. I desire to strike the poetic spark out of absolute human clay. . . . Note the 'Old Chartist,' and the 'Patriot Engineer,' that will also appear in 'Once a Week.' They may not please you, but I think you will admit that they have a truth condensed in them. They are flints, perhaps, and not flowers. Well, I think of publishing a volume of Poems in the beginning of '62, and I will bring as many flowers to it as I can."<sup>17</sup> Lucas might not have agreed that the Roadside poems were "flints." He was known for his insistence on illustrative fidelity, yet the illustrations for the Roadside poems, perhaps with the exception of "The Patriot Engineer," bear little trace of the flinty ambivalence that characterizes the poems. If Lucas or the illustrators

believed the images to be accurate representations of the poems' content, they seem to have understood them differently than Meredith intended. To be sure, Lucas's emphasis on literal illustration did not eliminate friction between text and image. In her reading of Meredith's first poem published in the journal, "The Song of Courtesy," Linda Hughes argues that Tenniel's illustration "harnesses femininity to masculine dominance" as it depicts a woman with a downcast head clinging to an upright man, while Meredith's poem provides a more nuanced reading of the relationship where "men share decision making with and consider the subjectivities even of women who diverge wildly from ideal femininity."<sup>18</sup> In a similar way, the illustrations of the "Roadside Philosophers" are in tension with the poems, depicting pastoral calm instead of steely dissonance.

Meredith's Roadside poems might have cut against the grain of conventionality, but Lucas's editorial practices and the thematic shape of *Once a Week* limited this potential. Hughes notes that in the inaugural edition of *Once a Week*, "international politics and imperialism emerged as reference points."<sup>19</sup> Meredith's early verse would have fit the bill: "Arms and Old Law," as noted above, was part of an ongoing dialogue about British armament in the *Examiner*. In its inaugural issue, *Once a Week* contributed to this dialogue by publishing the first of a series of articles on arms by Adams W. Bridges.<sup>20</sup> William Buckler notes that Lucas tended to publish poems that were distinguished by two characteristics: "Very many of them were renderings from other languages, ancient and modern, with emphasis on tradition and legend; and the verses were usually made the subjects for the major illustrations of the magazine."<sup>21</sup> Meredith's early poetic contributions to *Once a Week*, including "The Song of Courtesy," "The Head of Bran," and "Over the Hills," can be said to draw on themes of "tradition and legend" from a nationalist perspective. "The Song of Courtesy" overtly participates in the mid-century revival of Arthuriana that *Once a Week* encouraged, "The Head of Bran" recounts the story of a major figure of Welsh mythology, and "Over the Hills" is a hunting tale of a young man and his trusty hound moving among the rowan and heather of the English hills. The accompanying illustrations underscore this romantic nationalism.<sup>22</sup> Significantly, Lucas did not include illustrations with Meredith's poems set outside of the British Isles, including "Phantasy," set in the Alps, and "By the Rosanna," which highlights Meredith's travels through Europe with Frederick Maxse. These poems, like the Roadside poems, would ultimately be included in the *Modern Love* volume. Indeed, within the collection, the cosmopolitanism of the European poetry balanced the Britishness of the Roadside poems.<sup>23</sup> The illustrations by Phiz, John Everett Millais, and Frederick Sandys might have hewed closely to Lucas's editorial vision, but it is clear from the first of the "Roadside Philosopher"

poems that Meredith was moving in a different direction, one that challenged any simple nostalgic or nationalistic interpretation of Britain's past.

The illustrations accompanying the Roadside poems in *Once a Week* are relatively consistent in their representation of a verdant, peaceful, and rural environment, evoking what Elizabeth Helsinger describes as an "ardently desired Englishness."<sup>24</sup> In the poems, the speakers are altogether less idealized and less uniform. In "The Last Words of Juggling Jerry," a dying juggler claims that politicians, parsons, and doctors swindle just as he did. The speaker of "The Beggar's Soliloquy" rails against the hypocrisy of churchgoers who refuse to give him alms. The "Old Chartist," who has recently returned to England after being transported for his activism, pledges allegiance to his old cause in spite of a disapproving wife, daughter, and son-in-law. Finally, in "The Patriot Engineer" a mercenary expatriate who longs to return to England tests the idealization of British nationalism. The poems are united formally by their dramatic monologue structure; their poetic speakers are unrepentant, insisting that their sins are no worse than the sins of others. Despite the foregrounding of the speakers' antipathies in the poems, three out of four of the accompanying illustrations emphasize the English landscape and minimize the figure of the speaker. Only "The Patriot Engineer" is set outside of England, though its speaker identifies himself as a Briton speaking to fellow patriots. Two of the "Roadside Philosophers," "Juggling Jerry" and "The Old Chartist," serve as particularly vivid examples of the web of connections that arise between the publication of the illustrated poems in *Once a Week*, the reception of these iterations in the periodical press, and the republication of the poems in *Modern Love* (1862).

### "Juggling Jerry"

The first of the Roadside poems, "The Last Words of Juggling Jerry," was published in *Once a Week* on September 3, 1859, with an accompanying illustration by Hablot K. Browne (figure 1).<sup>25</sup> As might be expected from Phiz, the image is rather sentimental. A juggler is pictured dying in the lap of his adoring wife while their faithful horse looks on. The gypsy wagon depicted in the illustration is certainly more poetic and domestic than the pitched tent described in the poem. Reading more like a self-congratulatory manifesto than a heartfelt confession, Jerry's "last words" seem, at least in part, to be a defiant reaction to a judgmental readership rather than an expression of faith and repentance: "You that are sneering at my profession, / Haven't you juggled a vast amount? / There's the Prime Minister, in one Session, / Juggles more games than my sins'll count."<sup>26</sup> If read as a prayer to God, this utterance seems rather sacrilegious given that





Figure 1: Phiz [Hablot K. Browne], illustration for “The Last Words of Juggling Jerry,” *Once a Week* 1 (September 3, 1859): 190. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

he renders God in his own image—a juggler—rather than vice versa. Jerry’s death is figured as God’s own cheat wherein life on earth is “juggled away” from the living.<sup>27</sup> As for his wife, the poem tells us that she has lived long and hard, yet she appears remarkably young and pretty in the accompanying illustration. Further, the couple’s positioning in the illustration suggests mutual adoration and affection while the poem evinces an imbalance. The juggler attests to his wife’s value—“But it’s a woman, old girl, that makes me / Think more kindly of the race: / And it’s a woman, old girl, that shakes me / When the Great Juggler I must face”—and to her skill in the kitchen as well as her fidelity: “Nobly you’ve stuck to me, though in his kitchen / Duke might kneel to call you Cook: / Palaces you could have ruled and grown rich in, / But old Jerry you never forsook.”<sup>28</sup> Jerry’s trustworthiness is questionable, though, as he also boasts that the queen herself has blest his entertainment. While the dramatic monologue structure requires an implied audience and while the juggler’s wife could be understood as that audience, her steadfast presence in the image overwhelms the ambivalence that grounds much of the poem, where the precise nature of the audience is

unstable: Jerry's wife does not seem to be the "you" in the lines "You that are sneering at my profession / Haven't you juggled a vast amount?"<sup>29</sup> If the poem's opening line, "Pitch here the tent, while the old horse grazes," is indeed directed at the "old girl," she has apparently put up with quite a lot.

While the poem suggests that a complicated past history informs the juggler's monologue, the illustration settles for a simpler symbolic register. Depicting the scene of his death as pieta subdues his defiance and his defensiveness; his death becomes a scene of rustic tranquility and tenderness, and his wife's role as the audience of the poem is rendered unambiguous.<sup>30</sup> Objects associated with his socially maligned work seem to have been cast off: three balls, a jaunty top hat, and a drum and mallet all lie on the ground out of reach. He turns his attention solely to his wife, meeting her downward gaze with an upturned face bathed in heavenly light. The humble and cozy wagon and the world-weary horse grazing in the background combine with the soft edges of the vignette to present a scene of intense emotion and domesticity. Two of Meredith's poems appearing in *Once a Week* before "Juggling Jerry"—"The Three Maidens" (July 30, 1859) and "Over the Hills" (August 20, 1859)—had also been illustrated by Phiz, and in each of the images a similar background was employed.<sup>31</sup> The visual consistency between the poems' illustrations suggests parallel themes focused on constancy and loyalty.

The impression of tranquility, domesticity, and even benediction at death communicated by the image accompanying "Juggling Jerry" seems at odds with the theme and form of the poem. Yet critics overwhelmingly emphasized the tone and theme conveyed by the illustration; the consistency of these critical appraisals mitigates the potentially polysemic qualities of the illustration or the image/text relationship. Meredith purposefully employed jagged meter to mimic the juggler's speech, thus reinforcing the idea that the Roadside poems were "flints" and not "flowers." In a letter to Lucas, he insisted that "Juggling Jerry . . . must not be too rigidly criticised in its rhythm, being the supposed speech of a vagabond freethinker."<sup>32</sup> Meredith's concern with criticism of the poem's form would turn out to be unfounded. Though I have found no published response to the poem's publication in *Once a Week*, in reviews of the *Modern Love* volume, "Juggling Jerry" is repeatedly singled out for praise. As was the case with all of the Roadside poems, the critics responded in an overwhelmingly positive way, paying little heed to metric irregularity or the vagaries of carnival swindlers. *The Parthenon* declared that it was "inimitable in its way": the juggler's "reflections and jokes and manly resignation to his lot, are given with a broad, genial power of characterization very noteworthy."<sup>33</sup> In the *Spectator*, R. H. Hutton declared the poem the "best thing in the book . . . not vulgar nor tawdry, as so much of the volume is."<sup>34</sup> Insisting that the poem was the "best" "of Mr. Meredith's character pieces," a reviewer

for the *Athenaeum* focused on its love story: "In this scene he recalls to his wife the story of their lives, and strives to comfort her in the closing hours of their union. The pathos and humour of this conception enhance each other, while the poor juggler's love of nature is true in itself and expressed in the graphic idioms that befit the speaker."<sup>35</sup>

The passage of time did not blunt critical regard for "Juggling Jerry." Nearly thirty years after the poem first appeared, Arthur Symonds topped other critics by declaring that the poem "quickness our blood and strikes straight from the heart to the heart as only a few poems here and there can do. We said that of its kind it is almost without a rival; we may say, indeed, quite without a rival, outside Burns."<sup>36</sup> As late as 1933, "Juggling Jerry" was used as a nickname for the carnival showman.<sup>37</sup> The consistent identification of the poem as one of Meredith's best, based on the pathos of the relationship it describes, seems at odds with Meredith's characterization: the flinty musings of a vagabond freethinker written in intentionally imperfect meter. The poem's speaker is, after all, a boasting man who casts everyone, including God, as a cheating juggler; devotes his last moments demanding that his wife make him more comfortable; and ultimately suggests that after his death she can, like a bird, simply move on to "new luck."<sup>38</sup> Meredith's comic impulse is grounded in the cutting acknowledgment of hypocrisy, yet critics seemed to respond more to the sentimentality of the illustration than to the harsh message of the poem. The illustration created the idealized vision that readers seem to have desired.

### "The Old Chartist"

Even more than "The Last Words of Juggling Jerry," "The Old Chartist," published in *Once a Week* on February 8, 1862, with a glorious illustration by Frederick Sandys (figure 2), demonstrates how periodical illustration can affect the afterlife of a poem. The poem's speaker, a Chartist recently returned to England after transportation, is resting on the road, contemplating his situation, when he spies a water rat cleaning itself:

#### V.

I'm not ashamed:  
Not beaten's still my boast:  
Again I'll rouse the people up to strike.  
But home's where different politics jar most.  
Respectability the women like.  
This form, or that form—  
The Government may be hungry pike,  
But don't you mount a Chartist platform!



Figure 2: Frederick Sandys, illustration for “The Old Chartist,” *Once a Week* 6 (February 8, 1862): 183. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

## VI.

Well, well! Not beaten—spite of them, I shout;  
 And my estate is suffering for the Cause.—  
 Now, what is yon brown water-rat about,  
 Who washes his old poll with busy paws?  
 What does he mean by’t?  
 It’s like defying all our natural laws,  
 For him to hope that he’ll get clean by’t.<sup>39</sup>

As with “Juggling Jerry,” critical response to the poem seems incongruous with the poem as written. This is most likely due to the fact that the thoughtful, repentant speaker depicted in the illustration seems to have little relationship to the defiant agitator of the poem. A writer for the *Saturday Review*, for example, interprets the speaker of the poem as a penitent and reformed Chartist:



An ancient shoemaker, who in early life has had the misfortune to cross the water on account of misbehaviour on a Chartist platform, returns to his native town at the expiration of his time, and is converted to common sense by seeing a water-rat scrubbing his face contentedly by a brookside. . . . He will go quietly home, mend the gentry's boots, comfort his old wife—who, while detesting his ways and his views, had faithfully stood by him with the consoling tea-can in the dock—and on some future Sunday he will bring his fine daughter, with her smug draper husband, to see the model democrat of the mud-bank.<sup>40</sup>

This gloss depends upon a curious reading of the poem's final stanzas. The Chartist does vow to bring "the linendraper and his wife" to view the rat, but only after declaring that he, like the rat, "will despise the sniggering throng / And please myself and my Creator."<sup>41</sup> What is more, the rat's efforts are not described as "contented" but rather as single-minded and anxious, even comically so: the rat works tirelessly at a cleaning himself, an occupation that is ultimately futile, given his environment. It seems unlikely that the Chartist would take from this vision of focused dedication the lesson that he should abandon his own natural calling in favor of the socially-sanctioned conformity advocated by his daughter and son-in-law. Yet few contemporary reviewers seemed to interpret the speaker's conclusion as a commitment to continued activism. In the *Athenaeum*, a reviewer is cagey about specifying the poem's "moral" and bemoans its obscurity: "The Old Chartist,' again, is well drawn upon the whole; but the lesson which he derives from a water-rat, though correct, is not sufficiently obvious. A moral of this kind should not have to be reasoned out, but, like that of the fable, should seize the reader at once."<sup>42</sup>

In 1960, nearly a century after the poem's publication, readers were still having difficulty "reasoning out" its moral. A query to the *Explicator* prompted Phyllis Bartlett, the great editor of Meredith's verse, to offer a verdict. The questioner wondered whether the poem's speaker was "resolving to moderate his political activities," and, "if so, does this resolution represent a gain in wisdom, or a retreat from principle?"<sup>43</sup> Bartlett's answer is unequivocal: "He stands just where he did before he was deported, but . . . the water-rat fortified him in his resolution to meet his wife, his daughter, and his son-in-law with self-respect rather than with the shame they would expect from him."<sup>44</sup> Lest any confusion remain as to the Chartist's position at the poem's end, Bartlett writes, "In the future, the Chartist expects to prosper better if he totally despises the 'sniggering throng' represented in his immediate family by his daughter and the linendraper. . . . The Chartist, in returning to his Cause, will try to build up the individual self-esteem of the workers."<sup>45</sup>

Bartlett's matter-of-fact tone suggests she regarded her comments as a needed corrective to the many contrary interpretations that had persisted

from the time of the poem's publication. I do not, of course, mean to suggest that there can be only one correct reading of any text or image, but the contrast between Bartlett's reading and other interpretations is tellingly stark. More recently, Antony Taylor described the poem as an "expression of mid-Victorian equipoise."<sup>46</sup> Of the speaker, Taylor writes, "With his passion spent and his youthful exuberance behind him, 'the Old Chartist' is representative of the peace, passivity and prosperity of the mid-Victorian years. His failure to renew his radical commitment symbolizes a renunciation of violence and a decision to embrace peace and harmony of a life lived quietly in later years."<sup>47</sup> Taylor ties the depiction of the Chartist as a "remorseful penitent" to Meredith's belief in the success of mid-century liberalism in overcoming the need for violent uprising, a view which pays little heed to Meredith's early advocacy of armament (evidenced, as it happens, in "Arms and Old Law") or his later radicalism.

Sandys's illustration helps to explain why the poem has been subject to such adversative readings for so long. Upon the artist's death in 1904, obituaries hailed him as the "last of the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood" and held "The Old Chartist" up for special notice.<sup>48</sup> The image was said to be Sandys's personal favorite among his engraved works, and critics heaped superlatives upon it, counting it among his best illustrations and often referring to it as his "most famous" work.<sup>49</sup> "The Old Chartist" was frequently reproduced in Sandys's lifetime as a popular lithograph (independent of the poem it originally illustrated) and was featured in numerous retrospectives of his work. Swain engraved the image, and both the engraver's choices and Sandys's framing of the illustration privilege the natural environment of the scene as opposed to the poem's speaker: the Chartist himself is relegated to the far left side of the frame, with the water rat serving as visual counterpoint on the right. Diminutive though the water rat is, its visual impact is increased because it is situated in a small clearing of white space among the otherwise highly detailed, even cluttered natural environment. Echoing the rat's industry is a distant scene of wood-chopping in the background on the right side of the image. These visual signs of work and labor function as a counterpoint to the Chartist's posture. Chin in hand, he leans on a stone pillar, *contrapposto*, in repose. While in the poem the Chartist is thoughtful but unrepentant, Sandys chose not to depict the final moment when the Chartist steels himself again for the good fight of his cause; rather, he chooses a moment of quiet contemplation when the Chartist's gaze can be read as wistful rather than willful.

By transforming the sharpness of the Chartist's utterance into thoughtful reverie, the image, much like Phiz's illustration for "Juggling Jerry," influences the poem's reception. In fact, the two poems share a number of similarities in scope, tone, and content. In each, a social outsider reflects on his past experience and the judgment he has encountered. Both remain

defiant—one in spite of his family’s ridicule and the punishment of transportation, the other on his deathbed. Yet contemporary critics interpreted both poems as pastoral idylls of folksy charm and nostalgia. The layout of the two poems in the magazine is likewise similar: in both, a few stanzas are printed under the poems’ titles on the page preceding the illustration. As Linda Hughes has argued, the layout of poem and image shapes readers’ encounter with the text, privileging text over image or vice versa.<sup>50</sup> Here, the illustrations are centered on the page with stanzas both above and below. The illustrations are likewise severed from the titles of the poems, suggesting their separation from any indictment or judgment these titles might imply: the loving couple is distanced from the word “Juggling,” and the thinking man is distanced from the word “Chartist.” This arrangement further underscores the disconnect between the images and the poems they are meant to illustrate.

### The Roadside Poems in 1862

Traces of the original publishing context of the Roadside poems can be seen in critical reactions to their subsequent re-publication in book form. *Modern Love* (1862) comprises twenty-three poems, including nine that were originally published in *Once a Week*. Despite its link to the volume’s title, the “Modern Love” sonnet sequence is not the first but the third poem in the collection. Before the sonnet sequence are two poems, the previously unpublished “Grandfather Bridgeman” and “The Meeting,” which had been published in *Once a Week* and illustrated by John Everett Millais. The group of four Roadside poems follows “Modern Love,” prefaced with the title “Roadside Philosophers.” A final section labeled “Poems and Ballads” includes the remaining sixteen poems.

Perhaps this organization, which sets the four Roadside poems apart from the others, helped to perpetuate the interpretations forwarded by the *Once a Week* illustrations, as the poems were regarded by critics as welcome respite from the formal and emotional demands of the “Modern Love” sonnet sequence. “With a sense of relief,” wrote a reviewer for the *Athenaeum*, “we turn to the more wholesome poems in the volume.”<sup>51</sup> Playing up the differences between the Roadside poems and “Modern Love” obfuscated thematic links in the volume as a unified whole. For example, both “Juggling Jerry” and “The Old Chartist” feature flawed men who depend upon the faithful support of an unerring and long-suffering wife. The role of these women in the Roadside poems is scarcely noted in contemporary reviews, yet when considered in relation to the complex, straying, ambivalent wife of “Modern Love,” who refuses to be unerring and long suffering, their presence becomes a hallmark of anachronism and

a powerful trope that exposes the protagonist's false assumptions towards his wife in "Modern Love." The husband in the sonnet sequence makes no attempt to hide the double standard that allows him to commit adultery with impunity while his wife's life and reputation are ruined by the same action. In "Modern Love," the expectation of absolute wifely fidelity and self-abnegation is no longer tenable. To put it another way, though the relationships in the Roadside poems are presented as vestiges of the past, they are not held up as ideals of times gone by; rather, they reveal that the juggler's and the Chartist's rebellion is made possible by their dependence on a subjugated wife. The poems lay bare the blind spots of the two men as supposed free-thinkers, for their radicalism supports only their own desires, a dynamic not unlike the one depicted in "Modern Love." However, the pre-reception of the Roadside poems and their accompanying illustrations in *Once a Week* discouraged readings that would acknowledge the thread of gender criticism woven through both "Modern Love" and the "Roadside Philosophers."

The inclusion of the Roadside poems with the sonnet sequence and other poems in the collection also exposes their critique of British jingoism. "Modern Love" subtly critiques British insincerity through its ironic invocation of French realism: the French, it intimates, baldly represent the exigencies of adultery while the British hide those truths under a veneer of pretense and pleasantries (see, for example, sonnets XVII and XXV). In a similar way, the Chartist insists throughout that "Whatever he be, England is his dam," though his version of genuine nativism requires challenging the fabric of English society. Banished for so long from England's borders, the Chartist cuts through platitudes, praising the water rat for his efforts. He, like the juggler, beggar, and patriot engineer, functions outside of mainstream British society and is scorned by social insiders, yet his vision is presented as having corrective potential. The Roadside poems thus echo "Modern Love," which similarly exposes the false gentility of its central couple.

When *Modern Love* was published, Meredith was thoroughly surprised by the ensuing critical reaction, which seemed out of alignment with his expectations and his assessment of his poems: "The notices that have appeared fix favourably on the Roadside poems, but discard 'Modern Love,' which, I admit, requires thought, and discernment, and reading more than once."<sup>52</sup> Perhaps most surprisingly, the very poems that Meredith thought of as flints were almost universally regarded as flowers. *The Saturday Review* insists that "it is in the direction of this racy and vigorous style of composition that Mr. George Meredith's real *forte* lies, though he would hardly be inclined to subscribe to that opinion."<sup>53</sup> One might surmise that rigid notions of propriety and ossified gender norms account



for the popularity of the Roadside poems over “Modern Love.”<sup>54</sup> But even adjusting for social expectations—which were of course neither static nor monolithic—the reactions to the Roadside poems seem outsized, inappropriate. It is as if the critics are responding to a different set of poems entirely.

The publication history of the Roadside poems makes them intriguing examples for considering the relationship between the periodical publication of poems and their eventual release in a collected form. Tracing the critical response to poetry published in periodicals is notoriously difficult as reactions are sometimes just as ephemeral as the poems themselves. I have suggested here that critical response to the Roadside poems in 1862 carries the residue of the well-loved illustrated versions that appeared earlier in *Once a Week* and that those illustrations articulate a desire for nostalgic idealism seemingly disconnected from the ambivalence of the poems themselves. As critics pay increasing attention to the reach of periodical poetry, particularly the role of periodical verse in the popular and critical imagination, this critical lacuna is sure to be addressed.

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## NOTES

1. Meredith, “Arms and Old Law.” Since it is not easily accessible, I include the poem below in its entirety.

1.

Twelve arrows, and a bow, and spear,  
 Old British Law decreed,  
 That every British householder  
 Should keep for Britain's need.  
 And skill to use, and force to wield,  
 And courage to apply,  
 Our fathers proved on every field,  
 And under every sky.  
 Cherish at heart their good renown,  
 And hold that Law revered:  
 The Darkness of a Land's dishonour  
 Never then was feared.

2.

They knew the previous gift of Strength  
 Their best assured birthright.  
 The grand old march to Victory  
 Faith blew them in the fight.  
 Their limbs were braced, their breasts were bared,  
 They reigned the Lion's reign,

Best dared, because not lightly dared,  
 And never dared in vain.  
     Let the hearth live with their great deeds,  
     Who made us what we are;  
     Who reared the little Island-Jewel  
     Free, and Freedom's star.

3.

'Tis ours the legacy they left,  
     Inviolat from wrong;  
 The ages of all Englishmen  
     Call us to be strong!  
 And though for us the thundering wave,  
     For us the hosts of air,  
 In trained right arms repose the Brave,—  
     God's with them who *prepare!*  
     Arms! be the cry, that so we pluck  
     The fang from Danger's maw,  
     And march secure in honour, loyal  
     To a manly Law!

To "Caveto."

George Meredith.

2. Ibid., lines 1–4, 33–36.
3. The poem was reprinted in other periodicals, including the *Carlisle Journal* (September 14, 1858) and the *Chester Chronicle* (September 4, 1858). In both, the dedication "To 'Caveto'" is omitted.
4. These include Esdaile's *Bibliography of the Writings in Prose and Verse of George Meredith*; Buxton-Forman's *A Bibliography of the Writings in Prose and Verse of George Meredith and Meredithiana*; and Collie's *George Meredith: A Bibliography*. Bartlett does transcribe a significantly different, unpublished draft of the poem. *Poems of George Meredith*, 2:1021.
5. Saito, "A New Poem by George Meredith," 654–55.
6. Ibid.
7. See, among her many works on the topic, Kooistra's *Poetry, Pictures, and Popular Publishing*, see also Cooke's "George du Maurier's Illustrations."
8. Ledbetter, *Tennyson and Victorian Periodicals*.
9. See the publisher's prospectus and statement, "Mr. Charles Dickens and his Late Publishers," 280. For a fuller narrative, see Buckler's "Once a Week under Samuel Lucas," 924–41.
10. "Mr. Charles Dickens and His Late Publishers," 280.
11. Ibid.
12. George Eliot was not pleased with Meredith's work. She wrote about the difficulty of finding good contributors in a letter to John Chapman: "It is so difficult to get a satisfactory writer! One can never judge à priori. For example, you had good reason to believe that the Belles Lettres would be

- well done by the present writer (Meredith, is it not?); yet he turns out to be unfit for that sort of work." George Eliot to John Chapman, January 26, 1858, in *The George Eliot Letters*, 2:513.
13. George Meredith to Samuel Lucas, July 4, 1859, in *The Letters of George Meredith*, 1:38.
  14. The first was Charles Reade's *A Good Fight*, which was published in volume form as *The Cloister and the Hearth*. For more on the circulation effects of the novel, see Buckler, "Once a Week under Samuel Lucas," 935.
  15. George Meredith to Samuel Lucas, December 20, 1859, in *The Letters of George Meredith*, 1:48. In *Letters*, Cline gives the text of the *Once a Week* advertisement in a textual note.
  16. "The Beggar's Soliloquy" was published March 3, 1861, "The Patriot Engineer" on December 14, 1861.
  17. George Meredith to the Rev. Augustus Jessop, November 13, 1861, in *Letters of George Meredith*, 1:45.
  18. Hughes, "Inventing Poetry and Pictorialism," 55.
  19. *Ibid.*, 47.
  20. "English Projectiles," 8–10.
  21. Buckler, "Once a Week under Samuel Lucas," 934, n32.
  22. See Simpson, "A Minor Road to Camelot."
  23. "The Song of Courtesy," "The Three Maidens," and "Over the Hills" were not included in *Modern Love*.
  24. Helsinger, *Rural Scenes and National Representation*, 8. Helsinger argues that in the mid-nineteenth century, scenes of rural Britain served "as the site of a contest for possession and definition of the country" (8). For background on the development of images of nation in Victorian periodicals, see also Sinnema, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page*, and for further information on narrative painting, see Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians*.
  25. Meredith, "The Last Words of Juggling Jerry," 189–10. "Juggling Jerry" was advertised in the *Morning Post* on September 30, 1859; the *Athenæum* announced it as "The Last Words of Juggling Jerry. By George Meredith. Illustrated by Hablot K. Browne" on October 1, 1859. The poem was reprinted without illustration in *Littell's Living Age* the following January. The title of the poem was truncated to "Juggling Jerry" in *Modern Love* and subsequent reprintings.
  26. Meredith, "The Last Words of Juggling Jerry," lines 37–40.
  27. In "The Innocence of Criminals," Chesterton rails against an irrational social structure that condemns the poor to imprisonment regardless of their intentions or actions, noting that the legally and socially sanctioned actions of the magistrate or policeman are often as problematic as those of the ostensible criminal. Chesterton points to the attitude expressed by Meredith's "Juggling Jerry" as the "only possible philosophy of this modern outlaw." Chesterton, "The Innocence of Criminals," 741.

28. Meredith, "The Last Words of Juggling Jerry," lines 53–56, 77–80.
29. *Ibid.*, lines 37–38.
30. *The Belfast Morning News* reprinted the poem as "The Last Words of a Travelling Juggler to His Wife," a title that foregrounds elements of the illustration: the travelling wagon and the juggler's wife.
31. Curiously, "The Three Maidens" features a woman crying over her dead lover, a theme that is reinforced through the image of the nightingale "dying for its mate." In "Juggling Jerry," the poem also concludes with a dying bird, though in a very different mood. Jerry recalls to his wife the vision of a pair of gulls flying over the open water; one is shot down, the other flies away. Jerry encourages his wife not to die for him, much less weep for him, but rather to seek new adventures.
32. George Meredith to Samuel Lucas, July 4, 1859, in *The Letters of George Meredith* 1:38.
33. "Modern Love," 72.
34. Hutton, "Mr. George Meredith's 'Modern Love,'" 580–81.
35. "Modern Love," 720.
36. Symons, "George Meredith's Poetry," 693–97.
37. In "Comus Corrected," the (unidentified) author waxes nostalgic for the carnivals of yore, bemoaning the fact that traditional showmen no longer exist: "It was the world of Juggling Jerry, and it is to be remembered that Meredith's poem pictures Jerry as a dying man." "But surely," the author notes later in the same piece, "there might still be room for Juggling Jerry and the men who do their little feats of personal magic." I. B., "Comus Corrected," 10.
38. Meredith, "Last Words of Juggling Jerry," line 102.
39. Meredith, "The Old Chartist," lines 29–42.
40. "Mr. George Meredith's Poems," 562–63. *The Wellesley Index* offers no authorial attribution for this review.
41. Meredith, "The Old Chartist," lines 111–13.
42. "Modern Love," 720.
43. Bartlett, "Meredith, 'The Old Chartist,'" 56.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. Taylor, "The Old Chartist," 459.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Obituary, 10.
49. Bate, "Frederick Sandys," 7. Gray commented that the "most searching and expressive study of natural form has been turned to admirable pictorial effect in 'The Old Chartist.'" Gray, "Frederick Sandys," 152. See also the obituary for Sandys published in the *Athenaeum* on July 2, 1904. Hubbard contends that "Sandys's most famous illustration, 'The Old Chartist,' owed much more to Dürer and to the popular German illustrator Rethel

whose designs reached his country in the forties.” Hubbard, *Some Victorian Draughtsmen*, 26. Walter Crane similarly highlights the illustration: “Such admirable artists as M. J. Lawless and Frederick Sandys—the latter especially distinguished for his splendid line drawings in ‘Once a Week’ and ‘The Cornhill’; one of his finest is here given, ‘The Old Chartist,’ which accompanied a poem by Mr. George Meredith. Indeed, it is impossible to speak too highly of Mr. Sandys’s draughtsmanship and power of expression by means of line; he is one of our modern English masters who has never, I think, had justice done to him.” Crane, *Of the Decorative Illustration Books*, 172. Talbot further notes, “To illustrate George Meredith’s poem, ‘The Old Chartist’ in which an unrepentant reform agitator returning from prison sees in the preening of a lowly water rat an encouraging example of natural self-esteem, Sandys created one of his most famous illustrations.” Talbot, “A Victorian Portrait by Frederick Sandys,” 303–4. Others cite “The Old Chartist” as an example par excellence of Pre-Raphaelite illustration. Squire calls “The Old Chartist” the “finest pre-Raphaelite book-illustration ever made” (*Notes on Early Music Printing*, 72), and Ellis, writing about the years 1859–62, notes that “Sandys’s drawing for Meredith’s poem, ‘The Old Chartist,’ is a splendid illustration of this particular phase of the Pre-Raphaelites as book illustrators” (“George Meredith,” 254).

50. Hughes, “Inventing Pictorialism,” 57.
51. “*Modern Love*,” 719–20.
52. George Meredith to Frederick Maxse, June 9, 1862 in *The Letters of George Meredith*, 1:72–73.
53. “Mr. George Meredith’s Poems,” 562–63.
54. For a fuller discussion of the critical response, see Mitchell, “George Meredith and the Critical Imagination,” 142–50, and Mitchell and Benford’s introduction to George Meredith’s *Modern Love*.

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